

# National Style in Strategy

## The American Example

Colin S. Gray

In the late 1970s, American defense commentators “discovered” something they really had known all along—that the Soviet Union did not appear to share many of the beliefs and practices that are central to the American idea of international order. Although the Western strategic literature of the past quarter-century is replete with warnings against the practice of mirror-imaging and projecting American desires and perspectives upon Moscow, those warnings by and large proceeded unheeded until the late 1970s. In the early 1980s, the U.S. defense community is in a situation where it acknowledges the apparent fact of national cultural and stylistic differences—a great advance—but it has yet to determine what those differences should mean for U.S. policy.

Two works, in particular, merit identification as path-breaking studies in this field: Jack Snyder’s RAND Report on *The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations* (September 1977), and Ken Booth’s somewhat eccentric, though brilliant, book *Strategy and Ethnocentrism*.<sup>1</sup> Neither of these were works of “original scholarship”—but, like Alfred Thayer Mahan’s *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660–1783*,<sup>2</sup> they dignified and elevated insight to the level of principle. The strategic cultural theme of this article has its roots in a concern flagged informatively by Jack Snyder. He has written as follows:

It is useful to look at the Soviet approach to strategic thinking as a unique “strategic culture.” Individuals are socialized into a distinctively Soviet mode of strategic thinking. As a result of this socialization process, a set of general beliefs, attitudes and behavioral patterns with regard to nuclear strategy has

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This study is part of a much larger study on *Nuclear Strategy and National Style* by Dr. Gray.

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Colin S. Gray is Director of National Security Studies at the Hudson Institute. He writes frequently on strategy and strategic issues.

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1. (London: Croom, Helm, 1973). See the appropriately critical, though somewhat ungenerous, review by Adda Bozeman in *Survival*, Vol. XXII, No. 4 (July/August 1980), pp. 187–8. Bozeman points, quite rightly, to the curiously biased judgments that Booth tends to level in criticism of American policymakers. That granted, the book, nonetheless, merits landmark status.
  2. (London: Methuen, 1975, first pub. 1890). Mahan “discovered” what the Royal Navy had actually been practicing for two and a half centuries!

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achieved a state of semipermanence that places them on the level of "culture" rather than mere "policy." Of course, attitudes may change as a result of changes in technology and the international environment. However, new problems are not assessed objectively. Rather, they are seen through the perceptual lens provided by the strategic culture.<sup>3</sup>

It is hypothesized here that there is a discernible American *strategic* "culture": that culture referring to modes of thought and action with respect to force, derives from perception of the national historical experience, aspiration for self-characterization (e.g., as an American, what am I?, how should I feel, think, and behave?), and from all of the many distinctively American experiences (of geography, political philosophy, of civic culture, and "way of life") that characterize an American citizen. The idea of an American national style is derivative from the idea of American strategic culture, suggesting that there is a distinctively American way in strategic matters.

Notwithstanding the necessary indeterminacy of some of the evidence, this article presents a multi-part hypothesis. First, it is suggested that there is an American (and, *ab extensio*, other) strategic culture—which flows from geopolitical, historical, economic, and other unique influences. Second, that American strategic culture provides the milieu within which strategic ideas and defense policy decisions are debated and decided. Third, it is suggested here that an understanding of American strategic culture (and, by extension, "style") can help explain why American policymakers have made the decisions they have. Moreover, if the past and present can thus be explained, it may be possible to employ the concept of strategic culture (and "style") to predict decisions in the future.

It is, as yet, unclear just how helpful studies of strategic culture may prove to be. However, it does not seem unduly optimistic to assert at least the following potential benefits:

- an improved understanding of our own, and other, cultures on their own terms;
- an improved ability to discern enduring policy motivations and thereby to predict possible actions;

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3. *The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations*, R-2154-AF (Santa Monica, Cal.: RAND, September 1977), p.v.

- an improved ability to communicate what we wish to communicate (whatever that may be);<sup>4</sup> and
- an improved ability to comprehend the meaning of events in the assessment of others.

*American Experience, Practice, and Style*

Notwithstanding Ken Booth's assault on the myth of *American Strategic Man*,<sup>5</sup> this author believes, with John Shy, that

. . . whenever Americans before the end of the nineteenth century thought about questions of war or military force, their perception of those questions was strongly affected by certain peculiar attitudes and beliefs that, through the conditioning effect of long historical experience, had become almost reflexive. A dichotomous idea of national security, an unthinking optimism about the national American aptitude for warfare, and an ambivalent attitude toward those Americans who specialized in the use of force . . .<sup>6</sup>

The difficulty with a debunking exercise, such as Booth's, is analogous to Clausewitz' concept of the "culminating point of victory"<sup>7</sup>—that there is a temptation to attempt to turn a limited victory into a complete victory. *American Strategic Man* is, as Booth alleges, beset with over-generalizations. But the concept, nonetheless, is proof against Booth's skepticism.

It would be an elementary exercise to demonstrate why Americans should be different—how their attitudes and behavior should betray unique tendencies. The American military experience, as John Shy illustrated,<sup>8</sup> has indeed

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4. Some commentators have harbored the illusion that, as a consequence of much better understanding, the United States could orchestrate an "interdiction" campaign *vis-à-vis* Soviet policymaking. The idea is attractive, but almost certainly infeasible. David Holloway, for a recent example, has noted, very appropriately, that ". . . these elements [Soviet conceptions of security and attitudes to military power—strongly influenced by Russian and Soviet history and state structure]—do make it difficult for Western governments to exert remote and precise pressure on Soviet military decisions: the policymaking process is largely closed to outside influence." "Military Power and Political Purpose in Soviet Policy," *Daedalus*, Vol. 109, No. 4 (Fall 1980), p. 28.

5. In "American Strategy: The Myths Revisited," Booth and Moorhead Wright (eds.), *American Thinking About Peace and War* (Hassocks, Sussex [U.K.]: Harvester Press, 1978), pp. 1–35.

6. "The American Military Experience: History and Learning," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 1 (1971), p. 220.

7. See the discussion in Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Michael Howard and Peter Paret, eds.) (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), Book 7, Chapter 22.

8. "The American Military Experience."

been extraordinary (a succession of victories from the Seven Years War of 1756–1763 through to 1945). Similarly, one could, and perhaps should, dwell upon a number of strategic-cultural legacies—continental insularity and isolation from truly serious security dangers; the conditioning effect of living with weak, non-threatening neighbors on one's frontiers; the experience of taming an expanding frontier; the enduring impact of fundamentalist religious beliefs; and the strategic meaning of constituting a nation of immigrants, to name but a few. Although Bernard Brodie was correct in his assertion that “. . . good strategy presumes good anthropology and sociology,”<sup>9</sup> the starting point for the professional strategist should be the subject that he understands best—strategy, not cultural anthropology. In doing so, it is important to begin with the facts. What are the facts? “Facts” tend to be historically bounded; the historical mandate assumed here are the facts of the period 1960–1981, during which the United States:

—acquiesced in a style of defense leadership that was “managerial” rather than “strategic.”<sup>10</sup> (The McNamara revolution in the Pentagon effected, for the first time, genuine central civilian domination, in detail, of the military establishment, and a domination of quantitatively expressible analysis over “mere military judgment.”)

—has been unable, to date, to come to grips with the prospect of viewing, and planning for, nuclear war *as war*. (American, and more generally Western-democratic, values are deemed to be so incompatible with the actual conduct and consequences of nuclear war, that the vast bulk of American nuclear-age so-called strategic thinking has been confined to the problem of deterrence).

—while not positively intending to surrender a condition of strategic nuclear superiority, nonetheless acquiesced in the loss of that condition (by virtue of program inaction); welcomed the loss for reason of its anticipated reassuring effect upon assumed-to-be paranoid Soviet leaders; and was willing publicly to register the loss through the mechanism of manifestly equitable strategic arms limitation agreements.

—endorsed theories of strategic stability which rationalized the loss of strategic superiority.

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9. *War and Politics* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), p. 332.

10. See James M. Roherty, *Decisions of Robert S. McNamara: A Study of the Role of the Secretary of Defense* (Coral Gables, Fla.: University of Miami Press, 1970), pp. 105–6.

—pursued an arms control process which, by its very nature and structure, was erosive of the foreign-policy reasoning that underpinned the U.S. strategic nuclear force posture.<sup>11</sup>

—declined to recognize the true character (motives are another matter) of the Soviet strategic forces' program until the prudential required U.S. response time had elapsed (the condition today).<sup>12</sup>

—declined to appreciate the Soviet Union as a culturally and historically unique adversary unlikely to prove responsive to American political-military *desiderata*—no matter how eloquently, or persistently, expressed.

### *Strategy and Management*

As Edward Luttwak has argued, until quite recent years the United States really had scant need of strategy<sup>13</sup> beyond, that is, the often highly technical functions associated with "war planning." War planning and strategy are different concepts. War plans may or may not allocate scarce resources for the achievement of judiciously selected political goals: whether they do or not cannot comprise the basis for judgment as to their quality. War planning essentially is a technical exercise conducted by uniformed staff officers guided by agreed strategy. There is, of course, a case to be made for the point of view that in the absence of explicit strategy formulation, war planners will make strategy by default. However, in principle at least, the distinction is clear between strategy and contingency planning for its implementation.

It is the American style to devote far more attention to the management of large defense programs than to operational issues. Indeed, there is a startling historical contrast between the selection process and subsequent course of study of German and American staff officers prior to World War II.<sup>14</sup> As a somewhat gross generalization, while American officers were taught how to be good at the management of men and the provision of materiel for combat, German officers were taught, nearly exclusively, how

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11. See Richard Burt, "The Relevance of Arms Control in the 1980s," *Daedalus*, Vol. 110, No. 1 (Winter 1981), pp. 159–77.

12. It is politically uncontentious to observe that the United States, today, endorses a 1986–89 "survivable" ICBM deployment solution to a 1981 hard-target counterforce problem.

13. "On the Meaning of Strategy . . . for the United States in the 1980s," in W. Scott Thompson (ed.), *National Security in the 1980s: From Weakness to Strength* (San Francisco: Institute for Contemporary Studies, 1980), pp. 260–3.

14. See Martin Van Creveld, *Fighting Power: German Military Performance, 1914–1945* (Potomac, Md.: C and L Associates, December 1980), pp. 170–6.

to handle military assets in combat. The management bias in American higher military education has survived to the present day—with predictable results. The United States, in the twentieth century, has been a resource-rich country. Questions pertaining to the actual employment of force, and particularly of limited force, have been deemed secondary to the marshalling of muscle. In terms of its mobilized, and mobilizable, assets, Germany in World Wars I and II was grossly inferior to her enemies. Eventually, this inferiority produced the predictable outcome—defeat. However, the German Army in those two wars—although ultimately defeated because of deficiencies of substance—outperformed its adversaries to a noteworthy degree. The political fact of victory, achieved through brute force or sheer quantity of military/civilian assets, tended to subsume issues of strategy.

#### WHY AN ABSENCE OF STRATEGY?

Until the mid-1960s, issues of strategy, so-called, required that scant American attention be paid to political objectives. War planning, traditionally, was informed by an elementary, and eminently defensible, desire to *win*. American military experience, from the Seven Years War through to 1945, yielded some dominant national beliefs.

First, it was believed that “good” causes tend to triumph—and Americans only wage war in “good” causes. The United States, as the modern pioneer in democracy, religious liberty, and so forth (the “city upon a hill,”<sup>15</sup> the light from Plymouth Rock, etc.), is an extraordinary country. American ideology on participation in war is notably congruent, in some broad essentials, with that of the Soviet Union. Just as the Soviet Union, by Soviet doctrinal definition, cannot wage an unjust war<sup>16</sup>—so American political culture cannot accommodate the idea that the United States can, and occasionally should, wage a war for goals that are even controversial in terms of enduring American ideas of justice. The American anti-war movement of the Vietnam era was a thoroughly American phenomenon. The United States of Lyndon

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15. See Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Americans: The Colonial Experience* (New York: Vantage, 1958), Part 1.

16. See General-Major A. S. Milovidov and Colonel V. G. Kozlov, *The Philosophical Heritage of V. I. Lenin and Problems of Contemporary War (A Soviet View)*, Soviet Military Thought Series of the U.S. Air Force, No. 5 (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, 1975, Moscow 1973), pp. 28–34; and Colonel M. P. Skirdo, *The People, the Army, the Commander (A Soviet View)*, Soviet Military Thought Series of the U.S. Air Force, No. 14 (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, n.d., Moscow 1970), Chapter 1.

Johnson and Richard Nixon was judged, and found wanting, in terms of American values.

Second, it was believed that Americans could achieve anything that they set their hands to in earnest. The United States (until 1966–67 at least) was by and large acknowledged—though sometimes with a tinge of jealousy from abroad—as one of history’s success stories: Horatio Alger at the national level. The American national experience provides ample evidence for an optimistic ideology. “Americans” survived and triumphed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries against the might of intermittently hostile, and numerically vastly superior, Indian tribes, against the might of France and Great Britain—and, perhaps most impressive of all—against a very challenging physical geography. By 1814, as John Shy has argued, the infant United States had registered a historically very unusual achievement:<sup>17</sup> complete victory, in all essentials, against enemies of the Republic, and consolidation of a secure base for repetition of the same, if need be. Admittedly, as Ken Booth points out, contemporary Americans, reasoning prudentially, did not view their defense condition in quite so optimistic a light.<sup>18</sup> Instead, they assessed, with the benefit of hindsight, that the United States after 1814 (and really even earlier) was unassailable, save by domestic fission.

Third, in Sir Denis Brogan’s phrase, there was an “illusion of [American] omnipotence”<sup>19</sup> which was, of course, fed and justified by reference to the national success story. American wars in the nineteenth century had been waged against third-class (or lower) opponents—Mexico, Spain, and the series of Indian Wars—while the drawn war against Great Britain in 1812–14 was waged against a first-class adversary able, and motivated, to commit only a small fraction of its defense capability. The only truly hard-fought war of the nineteenth century, the Civil War, did not dent the American ideology of guaranteed success for the simple reason that it was, of course, waged between Americans. Americans, of all persuasions, could—and did—take pride in the (*American*) resilience of the Confederacy. Robert E. Lee is a genuinely national hero.

Although the United States waged war against a first-class adversary in World Wars I and II, Americans have tended to downplay the contribution of others to Germany’s successive defeats. The United States may well have

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17. Shy, “The American Military Experience,” particularly pp. 211–16.

18. Booth, “American Strategy: The Myths Revisited,” pp. 7–8.

19. *American Aspects* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), Chapter 2.

saved the Allies (co-belligerents in American terms) from defeat in 1918, but the Germany of 1918 was not the Germany of 1914–17. Similarly, the Germany defeated to a very significant degree by American arms in 1943–45, was a Germany already bled white by America's allies in 1941–42. This is not to argue that the United States could not have triumphed over an enemy at the peak of its power, it is only to note the historical fact that Americans, save for their atypical civil war have tended to wage war against enemies who were severely disadvantaged (by geography, in relative strength of political will for the struggle, or by massive prior attrition effected by others). Imperial Japan was very much a first class adversary in some local situations, but not strategically. Japan, as her own leaders recognized, had no hope of ultimate victory over a fully mobilized United States.

As Edward Luttwak has argued, in the nineteenth century Great Britain effectively conducted America's strategic thinking for her,<sup>20</sup> since the off-shore diplomacy of British "balance of power" machinations served American interests as well as they did British. In the twentieth century, as an economic (and *potentially* military) superpower that was protected by oceanic distance from theaters of major threat or conflict until the mid-1950s, the United States was permitted the luxury of intervening in wars already very well underway. It is true that United States' entry into both World Wars was precipitated by events created by others. But the scale and character of American military intervention was uniquely—among the major belligerent powers—at the national discretion.

Fourth, in their industrial hubris and resource wealth, Americans believed that they could—if so moved—mobilize sufficient military muscle as to overwhelm any enemy. Since Americans first scented world power in the 1890s, they tended to have faith in the ability of American technology, pragmatic "know-how," and a range of managerial skills, to overwhelm any evil cause. This faith has not been ill-grounded. In their individual "ways of war," countries naturally stress their comparative advantages and reflect their societal values. In the twentieth century, the United States, whenever possible, has waged technological war, rather than wars of human (*American*) attrition. Very sensibly, American governments have been sensitive to potential American casualties—as befits a country genuinely dominated by the idea that

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20. Edward Luttwak, "On the Meaning of Strategy . . . for the United States in the 1980s," pp. 260–3.



government is a necessary evil charged with facilitating the “life, liberty and pursuit of happiness” of its citizens.

The long historical experience of a condition of near-total security, courtesy of transoceanic distance from potential enemies, and industrial pre-eminence, were erosive of what pressure there might otherwise have been for strategic thought. The American experience, from the Napoleonic era to 1945, was characterized by an absence of year-in/year-out external menace, though the twentieth century saw a once-in-each-generation need to use actual military capability to overwhelm an enemy.<sup>21</sup> The idea of devising long-term political-military strategy (or grand strategy) to help control America’s external security condition, although defensible in terms of objective factors, could not be retailed successfully against the weight of America’s popular security culture. America was far removed from danger, geographically, and had near limitless potential to mobilize for defense, if need be. In addition, most Americans, as more or less recent immigrants, were not at all eager to see their new country, and themselves, involved intimately in the conflicts of a world that they (thought they) had left behind. Central and Eastern Europeans, Jews, Germans, Italians, Swedes, Irish, *etc.* did not, by and large—as new Americans—feel that indissoluble nexus to the “old country” felt, say, by British emigrants to Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Aside from the very important fact that no single immigrant group, relative to the total size of the American electorate (or even by virtue of geographical concentration), could—prior to 1945—affect American foreign policy in decisive ways, it would seem to have been the case that, in a fashion that is historically unusual, immigrants to the United States were eager to cast off their European memories and possible residual loyalties.

To summarize, prior to 1945 it was unusual to find Americans endorsing the idea that the United States should be, or had to be, a permanent guardian of international order. In the popular American conception, the United States was a haven for the disadvantaged (though very restrictive immigration legislation had effectively negated the practical force of that thesis); was an example to the rest of mankind (the “city upon a hill”);<sup>22</sup> and would, and

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21. Probably the best single work on the subject is Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War* (New York: Macmillan, 1973).

22. This thesis has enduring drawing power in relation to American political/social self-perception. Ronald Reagan made repeated, explicit, reference to the “city upon a hill” idea in his Presidential campaign in 1980. This thesis of American uniqueness has been challenged in Richard Rosecrance, ed., *America As an Ordinary Country: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Future*

could, intervene decisively on the side of “good” when disorder in the Old World so required. The reality of material abundance, married to a historic engineering—pragmatic national style,<sup>23</sup> was not a soil fertile for strategic seeding. Skill in the tactical–operational handling of forces tends to be encouraged by a shortage of material means. In the popular phrase, “necessity is the mother of invention.” A United States rich in machines, men, and logistic support of all kinds, is not a United States obviously in need of clever stratagems, or needful of a careful balancing of likely political benefit against probable cost in material and human assets. German tactical skills in the two world wars of this century were the product of military necessity—the side inferior in material and human assets needs to seek compensation in the quality of its tactics and strategy.

### *The Twentieth Century*

Although there have always been individual exceptions, it is nonetheless valid to argue that strategic thinking has been, and remains, alien to the mainstream of American thought on defense questions.<sup>24</sup> Prior to 1945, wars were waged, very intermittently, for the end of defeating a particular enemy, an evil cause—wherein the only admissible goal was victory. In World War I Woodrow Wilson appeared to endorse the goal of a military stalemate leading to a compromise peace, while in practice, he endorsed the military means for total victory (the plan to send 5,000,000 American soldiers to France was not compatible with a quest for a compromise peace based on a mutually admitted military impasse). Whatever the President’s intentions may have been, American military power was not applied in World War I in a manner calculated to achieve stated American political objectives. However, American military behavior in the First World War is, of course, easily defensible. General Douglas MacArthur was correct when he asserted that “there is no substitute for victory.” If one wishes to dominate the process of designing the post-war political order, one has first to win that right on the

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(Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1976). There is a good idea underlying this book, but it becomes a much less good idea when it is elevated to the rank of a major thesis, as opposed—more appropriately—to its constituting just a healthy corrective.

23. See Stanley Hoffmann, *Gulliver’s Troubles: On the Setting of American Foreign Policy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), Part II, “America’s Style.”

24. Which is not to deny the force of Ken Booth’s argument that genuinely strategic thinking is a rare phenomenon in any country. See Booth, “American Strategy: The Myths Revisited,” pp. 13–18.

battlefield. From time to time countries are unable to translate military victory into political success (witness France *vis-à-vis* the war in Algeria). But it is a general truth that in the absence of clear military success, only extraordinary incompetence on the part of the enemy permits you to have a decisive voice in the design of the post-war order. The political meaning of military defeat is very well illustrated by recent events in Southeast Asia.

World War II is a more complex case than was World War I, in that the goal of defeating Nazi Germany, unlike the Allied goal of beating the Kaiser's Germany, clearly was politically valid in and of itself. It is a relatively elementary matter to defend the American military conduct of World War II against the charge that considerations of the post-war balance of power in Europe were unduly discounted. It may be argued that American politicians: 1) are, of necessity, sensibly reluctant to expend American lives in pursuit of (distant) political goals unrelated to—and possibly even subversive of—the immediate needs of the conflict; 2) believed that the Soviet Union was “owed” a preponderant voice in the design of the security order of post-war East and Central Europe—by virtue both of the magnitude of her wartime contribution, and of the behavior of Poland, Rumania and Hungary in the late 1930s (and beyond); 3) believed that there was little or nothing the United States could do to prevent Stalin having his way in East and Central Europe—leaving as their only practical policy option an unambiguous accommodation of (reasonable) Soviet wishes that would thereby diminish Stalin's sense of need for an extensive defensive glacis.

Roosevelt's policy of near-unconditional cooperation with the Soviet Union in retrospect was plainly unwise and even naive. But it was understandable, given the “national peculiarities” of American political culture, and was easy to defend in the light of American policy assessment at that time. It is easy to forget, from the vantage point of the early 1980s, that the Western Allies of 1943–44 (when, for example, critical decisions were taken concerning zones of occupation in post-war Germany) felt profoundly guilty over the massive inequality of effort, as between the Soviet Union and themselves, devoted to the actual engagement of the German armed forces. When an ally is doing most of the fighting and dying, one is not in a strong position—or even likely to feel much motivated—to design strategies intended to deprive him of most of the potential fruits of a victory to which he has made a disproportionately large contribution.

Nonetheless, with the excuses admitted, the fact remains that competent war leaders are supposed to have vision and pursue long-term, as well as

short-term, security measures. Once the Grand Coalition was fully assembled and had weathered the crises of 1942 (those of Alamein, Midway, and Stalingrad), strategic genius was not required to discern that Germany and Japan's defeat (barring the improbability of German production of atomic weapons) was inevitable, and that the most important issues of Anglo-American statecraft pertained to the character of the post-war world. For good, though insufficient, reasons, American statecraft proved unequal to the historic challenge. Western allied forces could, and should, have liberated Prague, Vienna, and much of what is now East Germany—and should have remained “in place” pending a post-war peace settlement. Greater vision in 1944–45—admittedly at a non-trivial cost in military casualties—could have denied the Soviet Union many of the military–geopolitical advantages that she obtained *vis-à-vis* Western Europe. Certainly, the Soviet Union could have been denied control of Czechoslovakia.

American military performance in World War II was effective and successful, but it was effective and successful in a context where, overall, it was difficult to fare very badly. American staff training prior to the war stressed management, as opposed to tactical–operational skills, and lacked a firm commitment to true excellence in the candidates selected for higher command.<sup>25</sup> With a few exceptions, as always, American (and British) military professionals in World War II (specifically in the Army) were virtual amateurs by comparison to their German counterparts—save in the realm of management skills.<sup>26</sup> The German Army that American soldiers met in combat in Normandy was advanced in its decline, devoid of air cover, and mishandled in good part for reason of Hitler's ill-timed interventions. Super-abundance of military resources, not to mention the debilitating requirements of coalition management, led the Western Allies, in effect, to pursue a strategy of attrition instead of annihilation through maneuver. Attrition, of course, is the risk-minimizing option, since the larger side must win (provided the adversary does not have available any annihilation options of his own).<sup>27</sup>

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25. Crevelld, *Fighting Power: German Military Performance, 1914–1945*, pp. 170–6.

26. Although this author is stressing the relative (to Germans) absence of strategic and operational–tactical skill on the part of American generals, he is not at all dismissive of the significance of logistic management. Readers are recommended, most strongly, to see Martin Van Crevelld, *Supplying War: Logistics from Wallenstein to Patton* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1977). If a general cannot feed, move, or (re)equip his men, he will lose, no matter what his measure of strategic or tactical skill.

27. Critics of NATO “strategy” have noticed that NATO's military thinking and planning more closely approximates “attrition” than it does visions of “annihilation-through-maneuver.” Ger-

However unimaginative and deficient in strategic vision was the general American conduct of its campaigning in World War II, at least it had the virtue of pursuing the unambiguous, attainable, popular, and necessary (though not sufficient) goal of *victory*.

The astrategic American tradition, the product of continental insularity and abundant defense mobilization potential, continued into the nuclear age—although it took different forms. The American national military experience, prior to 1945, was characterized by relatively short, relatively cheap, and unambiguously successful campaigning against enemies easily portrayed in demonological terms. In practice, if not in terms of public recognition, the United States waged two balance-of-power wars in 1917–18 and 1941–45—wars whose goals were to prevent the domination of Eurasia by a single country/coalition. However, as Henry Kissinger came to lament, Americans do not think geopolitically,<sup>28</sup> and tend to be unwilling to sacrifice their nearest and dearest for the balance of power, or for international equilibrium—even if American security rests upon the preservation, or restoration of such a balance, or equilibrium. This is not acceptable language in American political culture.

*“The New Strategy”*<sup>29</sup>

The period from the mid-1950s until the early 1960s saw the evolution and development, very largely by civilian theorists, of ideas on—or supposedly on—strategy, which, superficially at least, fundamentally challenged the traditional American way of war. The three central pillars of “The New Strategy”—deterrence theory, limited war theory, and arms control theory, appeared to represent a sharp break with traditional American style.

—*Deterrence* theory was held to require a condition of near wartime readiness in peacetime, year after year. (The traditional American pattern was unpreparedness—during peacetime “normalcy.” When war finally appeared

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many could not win a war of attrition in 1944–45, the Soviet Union in the 1980s could. See Edward N. Luttwak, “The Operational Level of War,” *International Security*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Winter 1980/81), pp. 61–79.

28. Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), p. 914.

29. This is the title of the near-definitive, but still unpublished, study of American strategic thinking in the so-called “golden era” of 1955–65, by James King. This author has been fortunate enough to read and comment upon King’s manuscript. For a review of nuclear age strategic studies, see Colin S. Gray, *Strategic Studies: A Critical Assessment* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1982).

inevitable, initial setbacks, mobilization, and eventual triumph would characterize American efforts).

- Limited War* theory required a readiness to apply a limited quantity and quality of force for limited political goals, thereby requiring circumstantial redefinition of the meaning of victory.<sup>30</sup>
- Arms Control* theory pertains to “some kind of collaboration with the countries that are potential enemies.”<sup>31</sup> (This involved the conduct of business with those presumed to be evilly disposed).

These theories could have been developed in a way, and with policy implications, compatible with prudent strategic thinking. By and large they were not. Henry Kissinger, in the first popular work published on nuclear strategy, in 1957, bemoaned the traditional absence of strategic thinking in the United States: the inability to relate power to political purpose.<sup>32</sup> For the better part of a decade, 1955–65, American theorists elaborated schemes for the fine-tuning of military power, in threat and, if need be, in execution, for the securing of limited political objectives.<sup>33</sup> The era of American strategic thinking appeared to have arrived. Indeed, as Ken Booth reminds us, many commentators in the United States and abroad were distressed by what they discerned as an over-intellectualized American approach to military–diplomatic problems.<sup>34</sup> This article has no quarrel with the earnest endeavor to think strategically, its quarrel is with the content of much of that thought and with the eventual consequences of that thought when it came to dominate American policy-making in the 1960s and 1970s.

Because of the effective preponderance of (uniformed) military opinion within the U.S. defense establishment prior to 1961,<sup>35</sup> in a context of massive,

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30. See Robert E. Osgood, *Limited War Revisited* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1979).

31. Thomas C. Schelling and Morton H. Halperin, *Strategy and Arms Control* (New York: The Twentieth Century Fund, 1961), p. 142.

32. *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957), Chapter 1.

33. See King, *The New Strategy*; Michael Mandelbaum, *The Nuclear Question: The United States and Nuclear Weapons, 1946–1976* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1979), Chapters 3–5; and Colin S. Gray, *Strategic Studies and Public Policy: The American Experience* (Lexington, Ky.: The University Press of Kentucky, 1982, forthcoming).

34. “American Strategy: the Myths Revisited,” pp. 5–7.

35. This is not to claim that American statecraft was dominated by soldiers, still less that it was dominated by soldiers who approached political problems in a distinctively military way. It is a fact that until Robert McNamara became Secretary of Defense, the Office of the Secretary of Defense did not dominate the process of defense planning—though, of course, it did have a major influence via the fiscal guidance that it provided. See Carl Borklund, *Men of the Pentagon, From Forrestal to McNamara*, (New York: Praeger, 1966); Richard K. Betts, *Soldiers, Statesmen, and Cold War Crises* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977).

if unplanned U.S. military superiority over the Soviet Union, American war-planning in the 1950s, if ever tested in combat, should have led to the military, political, and economic annihilation of the Soviet Union (and China). As early as August 18, 1948—in the document NSC 20/1—official American thinking rejected the idea of unconditional surrender, or total victory, as a prudent and feasible war aim.<sup>36</sup> This novel departure from the American tradition reflected both the recent experience with Germany and, above all else, an appreciation of the scale of effort required to elicit such an outcome in a war with the Soviet Union. After 1954–55, however, the deployment of thermonuclear weapons with a Strategic Air Command and expanded and re-equipped naval aviation meant that the United States' defense community was back in the victory-effecting business.

Notwithstanding the contemporary (mid-1950s) theorizing on the subject of deterrence, with its highly critical (of official policy) tone and content, SAC did have war plans which made strategic sense. An American President could back his foreign policy, if need be, with threats of central nuclear employment, and expect to be believed. American political objectives could be advanced by nuclear action because the United States should have won such a war in classic fashion. Soviet military (and industrial) power could have been defeated and most Western—and certainly most American—as-sets, could have been protected.

Most leading U.S. defense intellectuals (with some exceptions) preferred to focus upon pre-war deterrence, and to abstain from investigation of putative operational strategy. More to the point, they neglected the logical, and practical political, connection between likely net prowess in war and the quality of pre-war deterrent effect. For much of the post-war period, this neglect was a matter of relatively little importance, because Soviet leaders had no difficulty appreciating that whatever the deficiencies in American strategic thought might be, the Soviet Union would lose a war. This is a fairly generous interpretation, because if the Soviet Union anticipated being able to compel the United States to take the lead in a process of escalation, then the phenomenon of self-deterrence should paralyze American, rather than Soviet will. The United States would have been the first country to face

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36. "U.S. Objectives with Respect to Russia, NSC 20/1, August 18, 1948 (Top Secret)," in Thomas H. Etzold and John L. Gaddis (eds.), *Containment: Documents on American Policy and Strategy, 1945–1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), pp. 173–203.

the decision of whether or not to initiate action very likely to result, by way of retaliation, in catastrophic damage.

The quantity and quality of weaponry available, and the sound professional inclination of SAC produced, therefore, a robust theory of victory in the 1950s. The next decade began in a promising fashion, as the Kennedy Administration hastened to effect a very large build-up in ballistic missiles and, overall, to ensure the invulnerability of U.S. strategic forces. The 1960s, however, saw for the first time the domination of defense planning by civilian defense intellectuals who, by and large, had a managerial, or defense-analytical, rather than a strategic orientation.<sup>37</sup>

With the benefit of hindsight, it is not obvious whether the poverty of American strategic thought and practice in the 1960s and 1970s reflected the reassertion of longstanding traditional patterns, or whether those two decades, instead, saw the temporary dominance by a strategic subculture. The facts of the past twenty years are clear, even if the relations among all of the responsible driving forces are not. In 1960–61, the United States almost certainly could have won a war against the Soviet Union, under most probable conditions: not a war of *attrition*, with both sides taking comparable damage and then the more resilient side staying the course longer, but a war of *annihilation*. By 1981, albeit very expensively, the Soviet Union had achieved a position of marginal strategic superiority—meaning that with good luck and judgment she would win at modest cost; with less good luck and less good judgment she should still win, though very probably at catastrophic cost.<sup>38</sup> Overall, it is a condition wherein the United States should be deterred from pressing political conflicts to the point of direct Soviet–American military action.<sup>39</sup>

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37. An early statement of the proposition that defense may be approached as an economic problem (or exercise in the efficient allocation of scarce resources) was Bernard Brodie, "Strategy as a Science," *World Politics*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (July 1949), pp. 476–88. The proposition is valid provided it is qualified. Defense is an economic problem, but it is not only, and should not be approached largely, as an economic problem. "The art of war" is not synonymous with defense management and cannot be approached via defense analysis.

38. By "win" the author means achieve its political objectives.

39. This point was made very forcefully by General Alexander Haig in his prepared statement (confirmation hearings) before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on January 9, 1981. "Unchecked, the growth of Soviet military power must eventually paralyze Western policy altogether." "Major Points From Appearance by Haig Before Senate Committee," *The New York Times*, January 10, 1981, p. 9.



### *American Attitudes*

The dominant strain in the American defense community for twenty years, while not generally demeaning the theoretical value of strategic superiority, came to believe that:

- meaningful superiority could not be regained or, if regained, sustained. Moreover, such superiority was not necessary to meet the goals set by national security policy;
- the evolution of technology was imposing an impasse, a strategic deadlock;
- continued doctrinal commitment to strategic superiority would merely license the armed services to request larger forces from which little, if any, net political or military benefit could be anticipated;
- little benefit could be expected because the Soviet Union would react in such a fashion to any efforts to ensure superiority as to nullify those efforts. Damage-limitation came to be seen as the primary dynamic of the “arms race.”

As a plausible generalization, the American defense community came to fear the arms race more than it did the Soviet Union. After a brief flurry of interest in strategic operational issues, Robert McNamara declined to press for major revisions in targeting strategy.<sup>40</sup> Although the targeting professionals in Omaha continued to do their best to match available weapons to an expanding target list, there was only minimal high-level civilian, or military, guidance offered for the shaping of war plans which would provide for flexibility in execution in support of particular war aims.<sup>41</sup> (This is not to deny that, in time of acute crisis, very selective attack options could, in principle at least, be designed *ad hoc*.)

Overall, however, it is true to claim that the defense community, at the high policymaking level, came to be profoundly disinterested in nuclear (operational) strategy. Nuclear weapons had “Utility [only] in Nonuse”:<sup>42</sup>

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40. See Henry S. Rowen, “Formulating Strategic Doctrine,” in *Commission on the Organization of the Government for the Conduct of Foreign Policy*, Vol. 4, Appendix K: “Adequacy of Current Organization: Defense and Arms Control” (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, June 1975), pp. 231–2.

41. *Ibid.* p. 233.

42. Brodie, *War and Politics*, the subtitle of Chapter 9.

they came to be considered more and more explicitly through the 1960s in terms of a particular theory of strategic stability.<sup>43</sup>

What *uniquely American* attitudes have contributed to the cumulative relative decline in American deployed strategic power over the past twenty years?

First, there has been, and remains, a belief that nuclear war cannot be “won.” The United States, save for the exception of the Civil War, has always taken relatively modest casualties in war. (In World War I, for example, the United States suffered 100,000 deaths, compared to 950,000 for Great Britain and 1,350,000 for France). Demographic decimation, actual or easily comprehended, is a sad fact of European military experience. The United States, in 1945 and after, could not—and still cannot—come to terms, culturally, with the probable fact that war against a first-class enemy is a very expensive enterprise. The traditional American definition of victory would appear to have excluded any outcome other than one that entailed only very modest American casualties. As noted, this definition reflected American historical experience and a value system that accords great importance to the well-being of individuals. It is worth further note, however, that there is some friction between this devotion to low American casualties and the facts, throughout most of American history, both of an abundance of American manpower, and of a relative indifference on the part of American military commanders to local material and civilian loss (not to mention enemy combat loss). General Van Fleet, Commander of the Eighth Army in Korea, said in May 1951:

We must expend steel and fire, not men. I want so many artillery holes that a man can step from one to the other.<sup>44</sup>

As a materially rich country, the United States Army in World War II often would attempt to clear minefields with a profligate artillery barrage. The Soviet Army would expend men (and women) on the same duty.

Second, American defense intellectuals have tended to believe that other cultures either share, or will come to share, American values and strategic ideas. An important example of this phenomenon has been the fact that although American (and NATO) defense policy envisages nuclear war if need

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43. See Colin S. Gray, “Strategic Stability Reconsidered,” *Daedalus*, Vol. 108, No. 4 (Fall 1980), pp. 135–54.

44. Quoted in “American Society and the American Way of War: Korea and Beyond,” *Parameters*, Vol. XI, No. 1 (March 1981), p. 84.

be, for the better part of twenty years that policy has been contradicted by the widespread attitudinal reality that nuclear war has not been approached, operationally, as an instrument of policy—even in cases of true desperation. A United States serious about its declared intention to use nuclear weapons would not be totally naked of homeland defense. Because very reliable defense against all forms of nuclear attack cannot be constructed, it has been assumed (and even argued explicitly) that defenses are without value—indeed, they should serve simply to stimulate the adversary to deploy larger and more sophisticated offensive forces.

It has likewise been asserted that evidence of Soviet preparation for the conduct of nuclear war, by way of homeland defenses, reflects morale-boosting programs, domestic political control concerns, atavistic, though attenuating, traditional attitudes, or plain folly. The strong possibility that Soviet leaders view the American eschewal of homeland defense as reflecting low morale and an imprudent faith in deterrence has not been a popular position in the United States.

Third, there has been an optimism that Soviet thought and behavior can, if encouraged by cooperative American policies, evolve in a constructive direction. This reflects a belief that the two superpowers can stabilize their strategic relationship, in tandem with a stabilization of their political relationship, and that a process of tentative *détente* can move—courtesy of growing mutual respect—to the complex institutionalization of a relationship characterized, on each side, by a determination not to infringe on the legitimate interests of the other. The optimism which has underpinned the thought of many American arms controllers may be traced to a combination of idealism, classical liberalism, and rationalism. In this American view, war is an aberration in the natural order. Man can pursue his productive pursuits, and maximize his values only in the absence of war. Since war cannot serve the best interests of any community, the possibility of war must reflect some malfunction in relations. The Soviet Union, on this argument, is not evil or genuinely threatening, rather is it fearful of American intentions. It should follow that if only, or rather when, Soviet leaders can be brought to understand the rationality of, and mutual benefit that would flow from, general acceptance of American deterrence and arms control reasoning, much of the fuel would be removed from the engine of the arms race.

Fourth, it has been believed that the American military establishment, in all its manifold ramifications, poses as a great, if not a greater, threat to traditional American values than do Soviet ambitions (the latter of which

have been misassessed on the hostile side by official assessors with vested interests).<sup>45</sup> The decline in the American willingness to compete in strategic weapons began prior to the depredations caused by popular (or, at least, vocal and politically significant) reactions to the Vietnam War. That decline flowed from the honest, if astrategic, conviction of defense intellectuals that strategic superiority probably could not be maintained; that attempts to maintain it would simply spur the Soviet Union to compete more energetically (and ultimately successfully in the attainment of a rough parity); and that strategic stability achieved in substantial part through a broadly conceived commitment to arms control processes would constitute a virtuous recognition of (eventual) technological necessity.

The “window of vulnerability” evident in the 1980s is in part traceable to the posturally debilitating impact of a highly questionable and distinctly American stability theory. But it is no less easily traceable to the several political–budgetary effects of Vietnam. The mere fact of the war reduced the financial resources available for strategic force modernization (particularly in the context of an ongoing Great Society program which President Johnson would neither abandon *pro tem*, nor finance soundly through tax increases), while the unpopularity of the war spilled over to political opposition to all military programs—including the strategic forces.

Fifth, there has been a widespread belief in the superiority of American technology and strategic ideas. The Soviet Union was viewed as a fundamentally unsophisticated country of peasants, capable of challenging in quantity but not in quality; in short, there was, among many American analysts, technological and intellectual *hubris*. Americans could find convenient scapegoats for defeat in Vietnam:<sup>46</sup> military incompetence; political incompetence; a deviation from true American values in the waging of an unjust war—the range of choice is considerable. But Americans could not, and possibly still cannot, anticipate seriously the Soviet Union achieving a

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45. The 1970s saw the full-blown re-emergence of a popular, generically anti-defense literature in the United States. Even supposed “scholars,” with proper scholarly credentials felt comfortable with such a concept as “the national security state”—as if there could be a state, any state, disinterested in national security (what would constitute the reverse phenomenon of “the national security state”?). See Edward Luttwak’s appropriately merciless review of Daniel Yergin’s book, *Shattered Peace: The Origins of the Cold War and the National Security State* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1977), in Luttwak (ed.), *Strategy and Politics: Collected Essays* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1980), pp. 271–4.

46. See Joe P. Dunn, “In Search of Lessons: The Development of a Vietnam Historiography,” *Parameters*, Vol. IX, No. 4 (December 1979), pp. 28–40.

condition of strategic nuclear superiority. Strategic weapons, after all—for all the ambivalence as to their political utility—were close to home. They spoke almost to the nature of the United States—of all the elements in the defense posture, they *are* high technology, and high technology is America.

The belief in American high technology was not ill-founded. But it took all too little account, in practice, of the difference between actual defense capability and mobilizable defense potential. American ICBMs, for example, almost certainly are more accurate and reliable than are Soviet ICBMs, and it is at least plausible to argue that American nuclear-weapon design permits a more efficient yield-to-weight ratio than does Soviet nuclear weapon design. Unfortunately, the size and number of Soviet ICBM launchers, married to a reliability, accuracy, and warhead design that is not very far behind those of the United States, results in a gross putative operational imbalance to the American disadvantage in hard-target counterforce comparison. The size of Soviet ballistic missiles used to be cited in the United States as clear evidence of Soviet technological backwardness. Today that size is recognized, and even envied, as providing the flexibility allowing for: a very impressive measure of future payload fractionation; relatively low-risk warhead design; and safe-siding with high yields (to compensate for anticipated operational degradation in CEP). American defense scientists may be on the technological frontier, but it has been the Soviet, rather than the American, defense establishment that has worked steadily to translate technical accomplishment into weapons deployed. At the time that SALT I was signed, in 1972, it was nearly axiomatic, to many, to assert that neither side, and certainly not the United States, would (or need) permit the other to achieve a politically or militarily meaningful lead in strategic weaponry.<sup>47</sup> In the 1970s the Soviet Union accomplished just that.

In their arrogance, American defense intellectuals in the 1960s and early to mid-1970s had difficulty even conceiving of the possibility that there could be more than one strategic theoretical enlightenment. The strategic-culturally distinctive doctrine of France, the idea of proportional deterrence, could be both dismissed from the vantage point of superpower logic, yet accepted as representing the particular circumstances of an inherently minor nuclear-weapon power. It was widely believed that Soviet thinking on strategic

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47. Henry Kissinger made such a claim in a press conference on May 26, 1972. See U.S., Senate, Committee on Armed Services, *Military Implications of the Treaty on the Limitation of Anti-Ballistic Missile Systems and the Interim Agreement on Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms*, Hearings, 92nd Cong., second sess. (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, 1972), p. 98.

nuclear weapons lagged behind that of the United States by perhaps five years. So, the contemporary absence of plain evidence suggesting Soviet endorsement of American concepts of strategic stability did not occasion much alarm.<sup>48</sup> The Soviet Union would be elevated to the American level of understanding as Soviet defense technology and weapon procurement allowed; as more Soviet policymakers came to appreciate the merit in American ideas; and as a result of the educational benefits of the SALT process. (It was popular to assert that the SALT process would result in the politicization of many strategic-weapon decisions, bringing them for the first time to the urgent attention of Politburo-level policymakers and senior civilian foreign affairs officials. Such politicization would in turn exert a stabilizing effect on the exclusively military perspectives on major defense programs that had theretofore prevailed in Soviet defense policymaking.)<sup>49</sup>

The politicization of some major strategic-weapon decisions in the Soviet Union may well have occurred. But, as Richard Pipes argues,<sup>50</sup> there is no evidence to suggest that political views of the value of those weapons differ notably from the view of the professional military. Moreover, the long course of SALT, from November 1969 until June 1979, produced no discernible shift in the Soviet "science of war." If anything, the decade of the 1970s was characterized by a marked convergence of American strategic ideas upon those popular, and authoritative, in the Soviet Union.

Sixth, to return to an earlier theme, the United States effectively substituted a well-meaning endeavor to *manage* the strategic balance and relationship for defense planning geared to her unique foreign policy responsibilities. The whole collection of shapeless and indefinable strategic concepts that have muddied the waters of American "strategic" thought since 1969—sufficiency, rough parity, essential equivalence—were all bereft of reference to American or Alliance military needs and, by extension, to their political and security needs. The enterprise of controlling, or more accurately, of appearing to control, the nuclear arms competition, tended to take precedence, in practice, over strategic planning. The United States was not developing and deploying weapons so as to ensure American freedom of action in crisis and war, thus assuring, insofar as possible, a meaningful pre- and intra-war deterrence.

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48. See Lawrence Freedman, *U.S. Intelligence and the Soviet Strategic Threat* (London: Macmillan, 1977), particularly Chapter 6.

49. See Thomas W. Wolfe, *The SALT Experience* (Cambridge, Mass.: Ballinger, 1979), p. 61.

50. "Militarism and the Soviet State," *Daedalus*, Vol. 109, No. 4 (Fall 1980), pp. 11–12, footnote 21.

Instead it was developing and deploying weapons above all else for their negotiability, or utility as bargaining tools, for the better management of a (U.S.-style) stable strategic balance.

Deep in the psyche of the American policy elite of the 1970s, as one would expect of a sub-culture dominated by lawyers (and politicians who were trained in law) essentially only expert in American domestic phenomena, was the belief that all peoples are fundamentally reasonable. Force, latent or applied, is anathema to this sub-culture.

Seventh, moving from beliefs to the rhythm of defense behavior, it is still the American way for the country to mobilize in response to "evil" behavior by foreigners (assessed accurately or otherwise in retrospect). At that point, the American style calls for the overwhelming of the enemy with the products of American industry, producing the underappreciated blessings of military superiority, then gradually sinking back into a condition of greater or lesser defense ill-preparedness pending the next "security shock." This political phenomenon has obvious, and historically traceable, effects upon defense preparation in general, and major weapon-procurement cycles in particular.

The admirable, and historically accurate (for the United States), American belief that peace is a normal state of affairs, married to the associated optimistic cultural conviction that progress can be, and is being, achieved in the quality of inter-state relations, means that the United States has inordinate difficulty sustaining an adequate domestic political constituency for a high level of peacetime defense expenditure. To assert that the United States should, prospectively forever, maintain a preponderance of military power over the Soviet Union, is to attract the counterassertion that one has fallen victim to "an ideology of international conflict" or is in the pay of "the warfare state." For reason of her history and geography, it is not perceived as normal for the United States to remain semi-mobilized for war, year in and year out. Unlike the facts of Soviet political culture, major social costs are associated in the United States with a high level of defense preparation.

"Feast or famine" is the American way of defense preparation. During the years of diminished political alarm over security dangers, the country coasts gradually downhill on the hardware legacy of the most recent procurement surge. For example, the United States deploys the 3-MIRVed Minuteman III ICBM in the early 1970s, and spends the next decade debating the proper technical character of a successor system. Minuteman III, the fourth-generation U.S. ICBM, entered service in 1970; the fifth generation, the MX ICBM, is not scheduled to become operational until mid-1986 (at the earliest—under

current procurement and environmental legal rules). Although improvements have been made in the NS-20 guidance system for Minuteman III, and the yield for the warheads on 300 Minuteman missiles has been doubled from 170 kt to approximately 340 kt, the U.S. defense community is locked into a true “generational jump” system. Unlike the situation in the Soviet Union, the United States’ Department of Defense has to justify, and re-justify, every major (and many minor) weapon program virtually at every stage of its development–procurement cycle. Underlying this continual controversy over weapons is a fundamental absence of consensus over strategic doctrine and, at the highest level, over grand strategy also. In the Soviet Union, strategic force modernization, year by year, is expected and is justifiable by reference to a compôt of beliefs that scarcely needs explicit presentation at all. The “national security consensus” in the Soviet Union is different from that of the United States. Indeed the character of the American defense debate often suggests the absence of such a consensus altogether.

### Conclusions

American strategic culture and national style in strategy, the product of the significantly unique American historical experience, contains some apparently opposed tendencies—which is why it is so easy to locate historical exceptions to any sweeping generalizations that flow from “essentialist” premises. America’s style encompasses oscillations between extremes, and both extremes are quintessentially American.

The American national experience produced a nuclear strategy, and nuclear strategy-related policy, in the 1970s which had the following characteristics:

- A theory of strategic stability, and its implications, was endorsed which rested upon the belief that the superpowers shared a tolerably congruent perspective upon a desirable *status quo*.
- A confidence was placed in reason and (American-style) rational decision-making to the extent that the physical protection of Americans came to reside solely in anticipated pre- or intra-war deterrent effect.
- it was simply not serious at the operational level. American policymakers endorsed flexibility as a *desideratum*, but U.S. strategic forces continued to be postured for a very short spasm war.
- Inchoate optimistic notions of progress in international cooperation were invested in an arms control process, the evident failure of which was rationalized by reference to ever more minimalist criteria.



These characteristics both reflect and contribute to “the American way.” But it must be stressed here that the analysis in this article is time-specific. This article examines a United States that is reconsidering the merits of the path pursued for the past fifteen years. Although national political culture and its derivatives, strategic culture and national style in strategy, evolve over time, American oscillation between under- and over-preparedness, between wishful thinking and Manichaeism is endemic, for the foreseeable future, to “the American way.” It is instructive to speculate as to the reasons for this.

First, the United States is an insular political culture. There is an expectation of safety, as the norm, which flows from the geographical fact of insularity. For an insular power to be stirred to take expensive and dangerous actions, foreign threat has to be (believed to be—rightly or wrongly) immediate and massive. The drawing of a sharp distinction between peace and war is natural to Americans and Englishmen—traditionally, they have not lived in constant fear of loss of life or liberty. Geographical isolation, however illusory, encourages one to discount apparently distant dangers. But the cultural proclivity to assume that peace is normal produces, when turned around by apparently unambiguous evidence of foreign threat, a possibly disproportionate military response.

Second, with very few exceptions, American policymaking in the national security area (foreign policy, defense policy, arms control policy) tends to be dominated by people with a poor sense of the value of history. In the inimitable words of one American policymaker, “. . . all this history business! We’ve got to make policy decisions.”<sup>51</sup>

To the average American maker of high-level policy, international events occur as by constant revelation and have meaning, if any, solely with reference to his personal historical experience. It is commonplace to observe that American decision-making style tends, pre-eminently, to mean that policymakers judge each event “on its merits,” in isolation, because they know no better. Pragmatism without principle produces a reactive, “muddling through” style. Since history provides the only possible basis for prediction, lawyers and engineers do not, and cannot ignore it; they simply employ it very crudely, by and large in unacknowledged and uncritical fashion. The U.S. Government is vulnerable to almost any professor-turned-policymaker

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51. Richard Quandt, who is quoted by J. B. Kelly in an interview in *Near East Report*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (January 23, 1981), p. 15.

who has a historically grounded (or apparently grounded) theory of statecraft.

Third, in part courtesy of the a-, or even anti-, historical training of American policymakers, American national security policy tends typically to be dominated by people who truly are expert only in inappropriate American domestic matters. A few individuals excepted, as always, Harvard Law School, Wall Street, or a governor's state house, really do not prepare one well, in general, for coping with the surviving graduates of Stalin's "Great Purge" of the 1930s. The U.S. SALT delegation, to be optimally effective, probably should be chosen from the ranks of organized labor.

In practice, the "best and the brightest" of the American educational process tend to be almost heroically ill-equipped to cope with the Soviet Union. It is unreasonable to expect prudent and judicious foreign policy assessments from an official who has essentially no historical knowledge of Russia or the Soviet Union, and no personal life experience likely to facilitate his rapid on-the-job education. It is a tentative contention of this article that the perilous defense condition in which the United States finds itself today stems, in part, from the fact that American policymakers of ten to fifteen years ago had no (accurate) sense of history and essentially had no understanding of the fundamental character of the Soviet Union.

The study of strategic culture, and the associated concept of national style, should enable us better to understand ourselves, better to understand others, and (scarcely less important) better to understand how others interpret us. Although, as illustrated above, many elements of American defense policy in the 1960s and 1970s (of which this author disapproved) are traceable to cultural traits, the concept of strategic culture is policy-neutral.

Americans are what their interpretation of their history and their contemporary roles have made them. If the United States has a (recurring) security problem that flows from a relatively unchanging national strategic culture, that is altogether a more serious, and intractable, condition than are the typical subjects of U.S. defense policy contention. American strategists may, for example, debate "quick" or longer-term "fixes" to the problem of ICBM vulnerability, but what can one suggest, sensibly, to encourage a level of prudence in threat estimation in a strategic culture that swings almost rhythmically between under- and over-preparation? This article, ultimately, cannot have a positive policy-oriented conclusion. It would be fatuous to urge that Americans be other than what they are. All that can be achieved is an exercise in policy science—that is to say, an analysis of the *structure* of

the problem. Our security dilemma is that both Russians and Americans have a distressing, though predictable, proclivity for behaving “in (national) character,” and that in the 1980s these two cultures/styles have produced, in competition, a dangerous shortfall in sustained defense effort on the American side.